

# In praise of the unexpected

Emily Kneebone

**E**ncomia, or speeches of praise, need not be about great men and women. Good things come in small packages and there is greatness and beauty in unexpected places. Here we see Lucian, who was writing in the second century A.D., enjoy the challenge of bringing such virtues to the surface.

An extraordinary Greek speech of praise survives from the second century A.D. A short and sparkling work, this speech describes the ancestry and exploits of a figure known far and wide for its wisdom, valour, and determination. Our hero is able to evade the ambushes of even its most cunning enemy, thanks to its considerable skill and foresight, and its courage and persistence have been immortalized by Homer himself. Not only does it share the tables of kings, but its status is such that it often starts to eat even before the king himself has begun.

Yet the subject of this eulogy is not, as we might expect from such a catalogue of virtues, a mighty ruler, mythological hero, or a soldier renowned for his prowess on the battlefield. Rather, we are dealing here with a mere fly! Many of us might struggle to find a single redeeming feature about a fly, and the ancients, on the whole, didn't think much differently. So why on earth do we have an entire speech devoted to praising this tiny pest? Is it an example of sheer perversity, quirky second-century comedy, or the deranged ramblings of an ancient lunatic? Can we really learn anything by looking at this kind of literature?

Well, in the first place, Lucian, the author of this speech, is known to us as one of the most accomplished, prolific, and subversive writers com-posing in Greek at this time. Lucian's *In Praise of the Fly*, moreover, is a work which would have been intended for public performance, and which exemplifies a certain type of rhetorical display which flourished throughout the Greek-speaking world in the first few centuries A.D.

## The Second Sophistic

But first, a little context. The Greek world had changed enormously since the classical age. The magnificent conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. had left not only Greece but vast swathes of Asia Minor, Egypt and the Middle East speaking Greek and defining themselves, at least in part, in Greek

cultural terms. These eastern territories were subsequently absorbed, little by little, into the Roman Empire as the Romans began to increase in power and influence. Greece may have stamped its cultural imprint firmly across the eastern half of the Roman Empire, but it was now itself politically in thrall to Rome. The Greek literature of this period is so fascinating in part because it allows us to observe a culture actively reflecting upon its own prestigious heritage and its relationship with the upstart superpower under whose dominion it had come.

And it is above all in speech-making that we see this reflection and self-definition at work. Throughout the Greek-speaking areas of the vast Roman Empire, the powerful and educated elite met regularly to hear, compose, and perform speeches in front of enraptured crowds, vying for prestige and political influence. This was a hugely popular practice during the first to third centuries A.D. – a period, and a cultural phenomenon, often known as the 'Second Sophistic'. Unlike formal debates held in the courtroom or the assembly, however, these speeches were intended solely for display. The orator (or 'sophist') would stand before the crowd and call for a theme on which to improvise, often a speech given in the guise of a persona from the classical past. What might Hector's wife have said to him before he went into battle? Why was Alexander the Great so successful? Who would win in a comparison between Hercules and Odysseus?

Unlike other institutionalized forms of oratory, then, no legal or political decision rested upon the outcome of the speech, and the only persons convicted or acquitted as a result were long dead or had probably never existed in the first place. But the audience were still tough: cheers and jeers issued from the stands. Woe betide the would-be orator who made a mistake or used the wrong phrase in his speech. Nor was this an easy task, for he was expected to pepper his speeches with references to and quotations from the finest Greek authors and to write and

declaim not in modern Greek but in an imitation of the Attic dialect in which the leading lights of Classical Athens had composed centuries before. Lucian was adept at this kind of endeavour, but the difficulty, and the artificiality, of such an enterprise is not to be underestimated: imagine today's speech-makers competing to compose in the kind of English written by Chaucer! Most speeches from this period barely make reference to contemporary society, let alone the realities of life under Roman rule. Instead, they repeatedly look back to the classical past, evoking the days when Greece 'had it all', both culturally and politically.

## Praise and paradox

What, then, of Lucian's fly? We have already glimpsed the showy dexterity with which Lucian extols the virtues of this meagre insect. His speech is awash with ostentatious literary and mythological references and with parodies of the textbook ways in which a dignified subject was meant to be praised. Take his argument about the role of the fly in Homeric poetry:

*Homer has so much praise and affection for the fly that he mentions it not just once or twice but frequently: that is how much its mention is an adornment of his verses!*

Tongue in cheek, Lucian here refers to the scenes in the *Iliad* in which Athena endows Menelaus with the persistence of a fly, warriors swarm like flies over a milk-pail, and Athene deflects a spear like a mother swatting a pesky fly from her sleeping child. Hardly signs of Homer's love of flies! But if sophists wanted to make their argument convincing, they bolstered it with evidence from Homer. This strategy, of course, also tested the audience, establishing an elite in-crowd: all may have learned their Homer in school, but would everyone spot the reference?

The real joke, however, lies in applying these strategies to a fly. Parodying typical speeches of praise, and making one's audience see the virtues in an unpromising subject, made for the ultimate test of an orator's mettle. Nor was Lucian alone in his fun, for sophists in this period took enormous delight in singling out unlikely subjects for praise, dazzling the audience with their rhetorical twists and turns. We

### The opening of Lucian's *Encomium to a Fly*

The fly is not the smallest of winged things, on a level with gnats, midges, and still tinier creatures; it is as much larger than they as smaller than the bee. It has not feathers of the usual sort, is not fledged all over like some, nor provided with quill-feathers like other birds, but resembles locusts, grasshoppers, and bees in being gauze-winged, this sort of wing being as much more delicate than the ordinary as Indian fabrics are lighter and softer than Greek. Moreover, close inspection of them when spread out and moving in the sun will show them to be peacock-hued. Its flight is accompanied neither by the incessant wing-beat of the bat, the jump of the locust, nor the buzz of the wasp, but carries it easily in any direction. It has the further merit of a music neither sullen as with the gnat kind, deep as with the bee, nor grim and threatening as with the wasp; it is as much more tuneful than they as the flute is sweeter than trumpet or cymbals.

Ἡ μυῖα ἔστι μὲν οὐ τὸ σμικρότατον τῶν ὀρνέων, ὅσον ἐμπίσι καὶ κώνωψι καὶ τοῖς ἔτι λεπτοτέροις παραβάλλειν, ἀλλὰ τοσοῦτον ἐκείνων μεγέθει προὔχει ὅσον αὐτὴ μελίττης ἀπολείπεται. Ἐπτέρωται δὲ οὐ κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ τοῖς ἄλλοις, ὥς τοῖς μὲν ἀπανταχόθεν κομᾶν τοῦ σώματος, τοῖς δὲ ὠκυπτέροις χρῆσθαι, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὰς ἀκρίδας καὶ τέττιγας καὶ μελίττας ἔστιν ὑμενόπτερος, τοσοῦτον ἀπαλώτερα ἔχουσα τὰ πτερὰ ὅσον τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς ἐσθῆτος ἢ Ἰνδικῆς λεπτοτέρα καὶ μαλακωτέρα· καὶ μὴν διήνθισται κατὰ τοὺς ταῶνας, εἴ τις ἀτενὲς βλέποι ἐς αὐτήν, ὅποταν ἐκπετάσασα πρὸς τὸν ἥλιον πτερύσσηται. Ἡ δὲ πτῆσις οὔτε κατὰ τὰς νυκτερίδας εἰρεσίᾳ συνεχεῖ τῶν πτερῶν οὔτε κατὰ τὰς ἀκρίδας μετὰ πηδήματος οὔτε ὥς οἱ σφήκες μετὰ ροιζήματος, ἀλλ' εὐκαμπὴς πρὸς ὃ τι ἂν μέρος ὀρμήσῃ τοῦ ἀέρος. Καὶ μὴν κάκεῖνο πρόσεστιν αὐτῇ, τὸ μὴ καθ' ἡσυχίαν, ἀλλὰ μετ' ὥδῃς πέτεσθαι οὐκ ἀπηνόως οἷα κωνώπων καὶ ἐμπίδων, οὐδὲ τὸ βαρύβρομον τῶν μελιττῶν ἢ τῶν σφηκῶν τὸ φοβερόν καὶ ἀπειλητικὸν ἐνδεικνυμένης, ἀλλὰ τοσοῦτόν ἐστι λιγυρωτέρα, ὅσον σάλπιγγος καὶ κυμβάλων αὐλοὶ μελιχρότεροι.

hear of contemporary Greek speeches in praise of blindness, baldness, dust, adultery, vomit, and bed-bugs, to name just a few.

Significantly, too, this kind of speech had a well-established classical precedent: back in the fifth century B.C., the orator Gorgias in particular had excelled in this field. Gorgias' *In Praise of Helen* took as its subject Helen of Troy, the most blameworthy figure in Greek literature, and exonerated her through clever argumentation. No longer an adulteress, Helen must have been forced or seduced into eloping with Paris, and so cannot be blamed for her actions! These were the kinds of tricks to which Socrates so heartily objected at the time. But a gleeful delight in the unexpected and the paradoxical became the bread and butter of sophistic rhetoric.

Lucian, hundreds of years later, simply takes the next step in this game. It may be illogical to praise a fly, but this is precisely the point: if he can speak so eloquently on such an unpromising topic and wittily marshal Homer, the greatest poet of all, in favour of such a lowly beast, then where else might his education and rhetorical skill take him? Speeches like Lucian's *In Praise of the Fly* are not only fun to read. They help us to understand a society obsessed by the value of education, the legacy of the past, and the enduring power of Greek culture.

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